

## From History to Fantasy: Writing Process of *Daughter of Nomads*

This project won for me an Asialink Fellowship to Pakistan in 2006. But I wrote other things first, *Marrying Ameera* was in the forefront when I returned – I got that idea crossing the border into Azad Kashmir after the earthquake when a lady in the taxi said she knew the guy from the Forced Marriage Unit at the British Consulate in Islamabad. ‘They make the run up here two or three times a week to rescue brides or grooms,’ she said. I sat there stunned as the idea for a story fell almost fully formed in my head.

*Daughter of Nomads* began much earlier with me telling a story to my kids while in the Karakorum Mountains in Pakistan. It was school July holidays, and we were staying at Kaghan, Naran, Shogrun, Lalazar. It was probably 1990. I often told stories, usually made to order, this time my daughter asked for a lost girl. The main character was inspired by meeting a Pakistani orphan with red hair.

I worked on it on and off, collecting info, doing research between other more pressing projects. I would get inspired again when I found info like Azhar Abidi’s creative essay, ‘The Secret History of the flying Carpet’. Read lots of Moghul historical novels, watched historical Bollywood movies like *Akbar & Jodha*. I read most of *The Shahnameh*, the Persian Book of Kings. I do things like that for cultural depth and so I have stories for the characters to relate to. I keep a visual diary of pics and notes.

My process involves a lot of research as I get ideas from that too. I collect images as this also helps me visualise settings and gives ideas for the plot. A photo of a rickety bridge will make me realise a boy needs to fall from that and so on. Also, I do mind maps of the characters, and keep a writer’s journal. I don’t necessarily do things one at a time, they are mixed, but I do tend to work on the characters first. I often can’t start the writing until I can capture the main characters’ voices, especially the protagonist.

Early on I work on the big things about my characters, usually in mind maps.

- What they want the most.
- What they need to learn or do better. Any flaws?
- What are they frightened of?
- What make them unique – any talents?

I know that my characters’ wants and will feed their goals, and then feed their motivations, why they want it. A goal needs to be strong to last the distance of a novel. In *Daughter of Nomads* Jahani needs to find her identity and then take up the challenge of taking back her inheritance and bringing peace to the northern kingdoms.

A character’s fears will usually feed into plot ideas.

So Jahani is fearful that she won’t find out who she is, and when she does discover who she is, that she won’t be up to the task. She was brought up simply, not as a royal person.

## Creating characters is the greatest challenge

I have this belief that my story is only going to be as good as the **characters** in it; that readers like plot but they will keep reading because they like the characters and want to see them succeed or grow. I know then that I have to have genuine characters, with backstory, who have genuine voices and who have strong goals and motivations that the reader can relate to and will follow with interest. I think of my characters as people who have a life before they get to my first page and I need to know what that life was. Not to dump it on the reader in the first chapter but to round the character out in my mind so I know what they'll do next and how they'll react to certain things. So I often do a **family tree**. It gives a character backbone and aunts to refer to in conversations. I also try to work out even the tiniest detail, like what a character's favourite colour is or what she has around her neck and why, or what's in her pocket. These things tell a lot about a character.

Sometimes I have a dream which gives me ideas – I dreamed of my mum and realised Jahani needs to think more about hers.

I also think that the character will determine every decision 'I' need to make about the story: voice, point of view, plot, structure, tense, tone.

## History and Fantasy

While doing the planning I was grappling with the idea of fantasy and history. Did I have the right to fiddle with history? I'd had a struggle with *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* with just fictionising history. I wanted it to be true but also wanted it to work as a story. It wasn't until I realised it was purely Taj's story and the exploring expedition was the back drop that I was able to write it more easily.

In historical fiction history propels the story but mustn't swamp it. I knew I had to weave facts into the fiction and the story must take precedence. I found it hard to come to terms with the fact that the story mattered more than the history. I remembered hearing Kevin Rabalais (2009) say he didn't look at his research when he wrote *The Landscape of Desire* (2008) and when he couldn't remember if what he was writing was research or something he made up he knew he was telling a story. I realised then that the story had to become Taj's and also that the historical events might have to be rearranged slightly to make a good story arc for children to sustain interest. The camels didn't exactly race across that desert – it was an agonising trek continually searching for water.

But now I'm turning history into fantasy. And I am so used to writing realism. People say *Marrying Ameerah* must have been so hard to write, but for me I knew what would happen. Fantasy was going to be difficult. I told my son: 'Anything could happen.' 'Funny that,' he said.

My research came up with this:

**Fantasy:** fictional events and people, including flying carpets

**Historical novel:** true setting and events, some true characters and maybe all true. Some creative imagining on the author's part to fill in gaps not known in the characters' lives. Suggestion not to change names or place names.

**Alternate history:** What if. For example, what if one of the coups against Emperor Aurangzeb was successful, or the Princess Jahanara did marry. But I wanted to write Jahani's story, not that of a Moghul Emperor.

Could I use the history of the northern areas of modern-day Pakistan and use their real names?

**Magical Fable** Sally Muirden calls her novel *A Tale of Seville* set in 1616 Seville a magical fable. Two characters based on real people, other major characters fictitious; the latter man becomes fantastical like Salman Rushdie's magic realism, e.g. *The Enchantress of Florence* set in Moghul India and Italy.

**Historical Fantasy:** I read some of these: Guy Gavriel Kay wrote some novels set in a fantastical Spain, but he changed the map and the names although the language and names had a Spanish feel. Juliet Marillier writes Celtic fantasy which are historical just not set in a defined time of history.

**From my journal:** Could there be an outline of truth? Historical backdrop and events, some fictional characters, some real ones? Could I refer to real people from the characters' history/past culture e.g. Alexander or Akbar? Make up events, just use Moghul stuff as cultural background – or just imagine it? Maybe only use setting, culture (use Hahayul for Hunza) what about their history?

I asked David Harris, who had written some historical books, what he thought: could I have imagined people in a real setting? Could I play with the setting?

'Hey Rosanne

What's the point of doing things we can do. You have the secret that Doctorow, the Nobel prize winner also understood: One of our tasks is to imagine things we can not do, then go out and do them. Another aspect of that is to entice readers to push the limits of their hopes; and we can only do that by pushing ourselves beyond our limits as we live and write. So, you go and write a wonderful book where imagined people wander into your real history, and real historical people wander into your imagination. That was Doctorow's way.' David Harris

**In summary:** *Daughter of Nomads* is an imagined history set in the northern areas of Moghul India in 17th century, i.e. a historical fantasy.

I wrote this in my journal: Write truthfully, show the human condition, and what motivates the character, and I can write culture without it having to be a true story. Maybe this will be more true than realism.

## The Fantastical

However, to be a fantasy there needs to be fantastical elements. My son asked me, 'And what makes it a fantasy?' He had just spent ten years building a world... and I'm borrowing a setting because I want to remember it.

'Well, there's a flying carpet.'

'And?' he said.

I kept thinking. Jahani, the main character is descended from Alexander the Great and a fairy, a pari. This is not so strange as one of the rulers of Hunza said this about himself. The culture of Hunza played into my hands so to speak. Jahani's ability to wield an enchanted sword, to take direction from her pari horse and to know what her snow leopard is thinking comes from the pari blood.

My original proposal was for two books, but only one contract came and one book deal. I tried to get it all into one volume. I was getting nervous by the time I was three quarters through and had 75,000 words. It ended up nearly 98,000 words. I knew that an adult fantasy could do this, maybe a YA. But UQP feel it's more suited to Middle Grade so it's too long. The publisher rang about putting it into two books. I was in the Alice Springs Caravan Park. 'Funny you should say that,' I answered. 'I originally thought of it as a duo.' Now everybody's happy. I am up to the structural edit now and have just split it into two books. It is a bit different from when I thought I'd have two books, because I hadn't written it yet.

When I had finished a few drafts before it was split, it was so long that I was finding it difficult to keep in my head – I'm only used to 60,000 words or less. So I gave it to my 'fantasy writer' son to read. Besides writing pages of comments, he made an agency chart to show me where this strong female character I created still didn't have agency in many scenes. Another character, especially one of the blokes thought of an idea or helped her too much. I was astounded.

Also, I'd left the snow leopard out for too long, and Jahani's pari horse. So now the leopard and the horse save her life in the snow.

My son Michael wrote the prophecy and poems for Jahani.

I rewrote it a few more times, cutting chapters, writing new ones, fixing scenes, making sure things didn't just happen to characters but because of them, i.e. doing my own structural edit before submitting. Plus CUT CUT CUT.

In a structural edit, I check that the chapters are working; is the best one the right one to start with? Is the story arc working, are there boring parts? Is there a climax etc? A good resolution? Do the chapters link to the next in some way and provide a hook without being manipulative? Have I written in scenes (with action and dialogue, and not boring summary) and haven't broken scenes in half to start a new chapter.

With *Mountain Wolf* and the two POVs of Razaq the trafficked boy and his Uncle Jamil who was trying to find him, I had to sort in the structural edit where to place the chapters as the two stories weren't concurrent. The uncle was always a couple of weeks behind him. So that was tricky. I find that how ever much I work on a structural edit the publisher will still have more ideas of what will work better. Those chapters in *Mountain Wolf* were changed around again. *Shahana's* first chapter was originally my second chapter.

This is what I did with *Shahana* when I was doing the structural edit on that one. I checked that goals, motivations and conflict were working and could be seen. Also, the internal as well as the external workings of these. An easy book on this to read is *GMC* by Debra Dixon.

When I was editing *The Messenger Bird* I drew up a chart like this to show all the characters (since there are three POVs) and what happened and who gets left out for too long. I wanted it to sing, and this was like a choral sheet with all the different voices.

Now with *Daughter of Nomads* I have the job of making enough tension in the first book for a single novel. There is a lot of tension in the second title because it was the second half of my original story, with the tension rising to a climax. The second one, *The Leopard Princess*, will come out four months later in Oct 2016, giving the bookshops enough time to sell the first.

A lack of tension can mean not enough suspense. Suspense is about waiting for or anticipating something. The character's goal needs to be challenged. If not enough tension, I may need to raise the stakes by using more danger. A time limit causes suspense. When a character has to go to the unknown. A deserted house at night? A secret can cause suspense. When the reader knows there is danger. Conflict can cause suspense too. I will need to check what is at stake. And maybe raise the stakes.

As I'm doing the structural edit, I am following UQP's report and also my own notes. Again, I have left a character out for too long: my handsome Azhar who flies the carpet.

I'm very thankful to DM Cornish for the brilliant map. In getting a sketch ready for him, I realised I had some scenes that were impossible, as a river was in the way for example. I needed a bridge or a different route.

So, now I have split it, changed two names, gotten rid of the historian and a minor character. I need to build up the supporting character more and the carpet. Fix timing issues and add more descriptions of settings and people, more colour...